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ABSTRACT

Described in this article is a critical procedure in the study cf literature defined by the author as a method of responsive interrogation of the text. The approach is guided by a study of relevant political, sociological, literary, and intellectual circumstances. Three fundamental questions are central to the discussion of the theory: (1) What does the writer say?, (2) Why does he say this?, and (3) How does he say it? Commentary includes reference to semantics, meaning, literary translation, and structural analysis. (RL)

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The critical study of literature

KENNETH QUINN

I shall describe a critical procedure I have developed myself because it is the one I understand best. It may be defined as a responsive interrogation of the text, guided by a study of the political, sociological, literary and intellectual circumstances. If that sounds too grand for the practical, harassed teacher, you can put it more simply and say it consists in finding the right questions to put to a text, and then finding the right answers. I say 'finding' in both cases because deciding what are the right questions isn't always easy; both finding the questions and answering them involves the deployment of knowledge, taste and imagination. The third of these qualities – imagination – is apt to be regarded as a frill, but is as essential as the other two: every historical document (especially a literary document and above all so complex a document as a poem) depends for its understanding upon the recognition of things which to the unimaginative intelligence will seem not to be there at all. The unimaginative interpretation of a letter, a speech or a poem isn't just a more limited interpretation; it is usually a historically wrong interpretation.

How do we decide which are the right questions? We must avoid not only silly questions, but unprofitable questions. For there are three types of criticism: there is the kind that is wrong, or wrong-headed; there is the kind that gets its facts right, but takes us nowhere – a very common kind; and there is the kind that finds questions and answers that extend and quicken our understanding. The critic's function is not so much that of a

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guide to a museum as that of the conductor of an orchestra or the producer of a play who saturates himself in his score or his text so that he can base his interpretation on the clues the score or text provides, using these and his knowledge of many related things, in order to grasp the unstated intentions of the composer or the dramatist. He may even express these intentions explicitly in his own words; but if he does so, it is not because he wishes to play the detective, but in order to use his formulations as the working tools of interpretation. We have all had experience of the way in which a text or score comes to life in the hands of a first-class producer or conductor; who would maintain that, because the text or score felt dead on the printed page, it did not live in the mind of the dramatist or the composer?

You might suppose that the first question to put to a text is: What is this play or poem or letter about? In fact this is often a very hard question, the final synthesis of many questions and answers (what *is* the *Aeneid* about?). We can break it down, however, into three basic questions. The first is: *What does the writer say*? The second is: *Why does he say it*? The third is: *How does he say it*?

Does this sound like a system of logical priorities, a tidy doctrine of one step at a time? That is not what I intend. We must disabuse ourselves of any illusion that the teaching of literature is a procedure that can be logically systematized. Equally we must discard the opinion, widely held among those who teach the classics, that literary criticism is only one of several distinct processes to which a text may be subjected. Textual criticism, they feel, is one procedure, grammatical exegesis another, literary criticism (or 'aesthetic criticism', as they prefer to call it) a third; some would even regard that as not only the logical, but also the hierarchical, order to be observed. I shall take for granted what few today outside classics who make literature their study would question – that the critic's goal is the total comprehension of a text; the possession in all its complexity of the verbal fabric, and as complete an understanding as is possible of the text as a historical event.

All the same, we can hardly ask ourselves three questions simultaneously. We must keep moving backwards and forwards from one to another. The study of a literary document is better regarded as an exploration of a complicated, often exciting, new territory than as a problem to be solved by logic and ingenuity. What seems the right question to ask first may prove at the outset insoluble; the thing to do is to strike out in a fresh direction.

Let us consider what our three basic questions imply, remembering that the order in which we take them now is not necessarily the right order in which to put them to a particular text. Generally speaking, of course, our first question '*What does the writer say*?' must come first. Determining the way the Latin words fit together into statements will be almost always a necessary preliminary to the exploration of a text. On the other hand, if the text before us – an ode of Horace perhaps – is one whose meaning depends heavily on structure – formal organization of the sense in metrical patterns, repetition of key phrases, and so on – we may want to start asking Question 3 before we can get far with Question 1.

I regard this, however, as an extreme case. For I have been careful to make my first question '*What does the writer say*?', not 'What does the writer mean?' The meaning in any full sense of a complex literary document can emerge only as a result of persistent, responsive interrogation of it. But even an accurate grasp of what the writer *says* is seldom easily gained. I find I have to free my students from the idea, which has not, I imagine, been consciously inculcated but which they have been allowed to form for themselves, that the statement a piece of Latin makes is not something which can be accurately fixed at all. They are apt to regard a Latin syntactical unit as a peculiarly crude form of statement which they must twist around, and improve upon, till it sounds respectable in English.

I am not talking of the kind of adaptation necessitated by differences of idiom, but of a method of translation in which the form is obliterated by free paraphrase. The intention is to bring out the sense; but young students quickly come to feel that the

Latin original, as a result of some special linguistic poverty, *needs* this improvement. They are naturally perplexed by what seems to them the alarming vagueness of Latin words. The dictionaries they consult break down the whole area of usage of a complex word, the whole range of its connotations, into a string of apparently unrelated meanings, each apparently equally explicit. What are they to do with a language where the same word (*iam*) means both 'already' and 'soon'; where one verb (*lego*) can mean (to judge from the two-column entry in Lewis and Short) 'to wander through', 'to choose', 'to read' – and several other things besides? But more to blame are old-fashioned methods of teaching prose composition, in which elaborate, woolly English statements are boiled down into simple, direct Latin statements. When students come to translate Latin, they naturally feel obliged to turn simple, direct Latin statements into elaborate, woolly English statements. In translating poetry this results in a habit of prosing away the poetry (we all know what a zealous student can make of – say – Virgil's *paulum lacrimis et mente morata*) till the meaning may actually be destroyed and appreciation rendered impossible.

I try to teach my students that translation is a process of groping one's way towards the sense of the Latin words, of considering and rejecting translations that are as literal as possible, until one has found a reformulation that can be accepted – not the one that sounds the most impressive in English, but the one that is the best substitute for the Latin. I try to get the student away from the vocabulary equivalents he learnt in his first years of Latin. For the vocabulary equivalent may be weaker or stronger than the Latin word. Usually the Latin word is stronger: *miscere*, *adfligere*, *cura* are examples; to translate *miscere* as 'mix' is often to ruin the meaning of the Latin. But some Latin words are weaker: *cadere* is often better represented by 'drop' than by its stock vocabulary equivalent 'fall'; 'forest' will often do for *silua*, but will be inappropriate when all the Latin writer means is a clump of trees. Or the Latin word may be a bigger word or a smaller word. Or the English equivalent may be a word that has

survived in Latin vocabularies since the eighteenth century but dropped out of our current speech, so that it sounds ridiculous or archaic when the Latin word doesn't. Or there may just be no reliable equivalent. I find useful the concept that words have areas of meaning which can be represented by circles. The circle of the Latin word and that of its vocabulary equivalent may be nearly concentric and equal in radius; or the two circles may overlap imperfectly, or hardly overlap at all; or they may be quite different in area. Mr E. J. Kenney in his answer to Dr Bolgar in the second number of *Didaskalos* has interesting, pertinent things to say about the importance of training in accurate translation and of developing a feeling for words. In some circles translation is apt to be derided: one should train the student, it is said, to think in the language, and translation interferes with this. So long as the process of reading a line of Virgil is automatically accompanied by an English statement assembled out of the vocabulary equivalents of the Latin words ('I recognize the footprints of an old flame'), this is undeniable. On the other hand I find translation the best procedure I know of for a preliminary systematic exploration of the sense. It is important to learn to think in Latin and not actually, I believe, difficult. But until we really know Latin very well, thinking in Latin, unless it is backed up by translation, is apt to result in blurred impressions. In my practical criticism seminar in Melbourne, where we spent a two-hour session exploring, say, thirty to fifty lines of verse, I used to ask my students to make a written translation beforehand; when we met, we often found it advantageous to spend most of the first hour in arriving at an adequate translation – in settling, in short, the answer to our first question. By insisting that accurate determination of the sense is difficult but possible, we can train the student to understand what is liable at first to seem to him paradoxical or perverse – the idea that a poem (for example) exists only as a complex of Latin words. It requires time and persistence to eradicate the belief that one goes about studying a Latin text as one goes about shelling peas – by ripping the text open, tearing out the intellec-

tual nourishment it contains, and then throwing away the verbal husk.

Let us turn to our second question: *Why does he say it*? This is the process of tuning in to a text. It involves really two rather different kinds of adjustment to our thinking.

One is the adjustment imposed by our historical sense. This sounds perhaps like making allowances, letting our author off lightly because he wrote a long time ago; or doing something ourselves to make his meaning clear because he can't be expected to make it clear for himself. What I have in mind is rather more legitimate, and a good deal more difficult. The function of our historical sense is to situate the document we are studying in its intellectual context; to give it its right place in the history of ideas. On a more modest level, this means getting the right reactions to the key words; on a more ambitious level, it means trying to decide why an orator thought an argument would prove effective with the audience he had in front of him; or why an idea, or an image, seemed important, or fresh, or moving to a poet -- or why it apparently gave him so much trouble. These and similar questions (for each of our three basic questions is only a starting-point for many more) are all part of the critical response that an educated man should make to *any* text. Answering them calls for a lot of information. It may call also for considerable sensitivity and imagination in applying what we know, or can discover, about the historical circumstances of a text. In dealing with Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example, we have to distinguish between those ideas about the nature of the world which Virgil actually held, and those which are part of the fictional hypothesis of his poem – between his beliefs on the one hand, and the areas in which he invites conscious suspension of disbelief on the other.

The second kind of adjustment is involved where an author decides to stop short of full explicit statement of his meaning. There is a danger, in reading a foreign language, of feeling we can relax when we have fitted the words together and extracted sense from them. But with a writer like Virgil or Tacitus or Horace we may not stop there. We must keep asking ourselves:

Why does he say this? The technique of these writers is highly selective. In addition to their face value the statements they make are often dramatically significant (they give us an important clue about what is going on) or psychologically significant (they reveal the thoughts of a character). The better a writer the more he is likely to prefer this kind of obliqueness to open statement. It saves time, it challenges the reader's response and keeps him alert.

I expect these may sound high-minded and philosophical reflections, of limited practical relevance to the everyday routine of the classroom. Yet, on the most unpretentious level of appreciation, asking the question 'Why does he say that?' can prove a constant source of illumination. Among the idiosyncrasies of his contemporaries with which Horace equates his passion for writing poetry is that of the hunter (*Odes* 1.1.25-6):

manet sub Ioue frigido
uenator tenerae coniugis immemor.

The phrase *tenerae coniugis immemor* is commonly treated as the kind of cliché that can be dismissed the moment it has been translated, perhaps with the comment that *tenerae* is a stock epithet. Yet this is a simple example of failure to respond to a text. If it is true, as is often said, that Latin talks through verbs, it is also true that Latin talks through adjectives more than English – the adjective builds in the sort of incidental comment to which *we* should allot a phrase. The hunter's wife was no doubt a lot younger than her husband – a common situation in Rome, a in all societies where matches are arranged. That should be part of our response. Another is to catch the sensitive, double-edged irony of Horace's comment: the hunter (like Horace in his passion for poetry) is a bit of a fool (his obsession is not one that can be rationally defended); at the same time, as with all obsessions, his feeling for others is dulled: guided by our recollection of Catullus' use of *immemor* in Poem 64, our sympathy goes out for an instant to the young girl left alone all night (here we need to respond to a special sense of *manet*) by her self-centred husband.

Too often poetry is read with the kind of limited response with which many people listen to a broadcast commentary of a cricket match. They understand the terms the commentator uses (cover point, leg break, square cut, and so on), in the sense that, if asked, they could tell you what these words meant. But their reactions are blunted, they make no effort to reconstruct the scene which the commentator is describing. To put it in terms appropriate to literary criticism: purely intellectual apperception takes the place of a full response to a visual image.

Our third question, '*How does he say it*?', is intended to focus attention on the way in which a writer achieves his effects. There is both a negative and a positive side to our response here. The negative side mainly involves training in not looking for the wrong things – and therefore making irrelevant criticisms. Before we accuse a writer of obscurity, for example, we should consider whether something has not been gained by a lack of clarity. It is so easy to blame a poet for being what we have carelessly assumed him to be, instead of praising him for what he is.

The positive side of our third question deals with what is sometimes called structural analysis, and made to seem one of the inner mysteries of the critic's temple. For people who know no formal grammar, who cannot tell an adjective from a relative clause, structural analysis *is* apt to appear obscurantist hocus-pocus. One of the advantages possessed by the teacher of Latin literature is that those whom he teaches *must* be equipped for the appreciation of the structural qualities of what they read by grammatical necessity. All that is needed is to relate grammar intelligently to appreciation, to point out, for example, *how* a sentence of Virgil differs structurally from a sentence of Cicero and *why*; or to point out what Horace gains by making the verbal fabric of his odes so complex.

You will notice I have said nothing about quality, nothing about the teacher's obligation (to use A. D. Godley's words, which Mr Kenney quotes) 'to invite pupils to admire the beauties of great literature'. This does not seem to me the teacher's

function – or for that matter good strategy. I would not go beyond enjoining an appropriate attitude of mind in exploring a text (I might describe it as 'alert humility') and deprecating an attitude fatal to appreciation, the common attitude of the man who patronizes his author or sneers at him openly. Nor do I believe, as some do, that we should use texts to prove or disprove generalizations, sound or unsound, about a writer or his work; this is a convenient technique in examinations, but a bad way to teach literature. I believe that judgement is something that should properly emerge from critical exploration. But that is not its objective. One does not have a meal in a famous restaurant in order to confirm or refute the opinion that a first-class meal is to be had there, though it is worth forming an opinion while one works one's way through the evidence, and even sensible to devote some reflection to this afterwards.

On the other hand, though it is not the purpose of critical exploration to select and reject, we should not confine our attention to what we believe to be first-rate. It can be highly instructive to put a third-rate text before students. They will be taught to discriminate. Moreover the occasional third-rate text lends an air of reality to the study of Latin literature; if everything he reads proves on inspection to be subtle, profound and deeply moving, the intelligent student will begin to suspect (perhaps quite wrongly) that the game is crooked, that the response expected of him is an exaggerated one.

* * *

What do I claim for the critical procedure I have outlined? First that those who adopt it can hardly fail to read Latin with enjoyment. This must surely seem an important and a needed reform. What seems to me more important is that those we teach will learn to appreciate what they read. There is a tendency to assume that appreciation is a cant word used by those who talk about literature, when all that is meant is enjoyment. I mean a good deal more. I mean a discerning comprehension which is often enjoyable, but is also instructive – our understanding of

the world is broadened and deepened. The procedure I am recommending can be applied as readily to historical and philosophical texts as to imaginative literature. It will teach the student the necessity – and the complexity – of understanding his author, instead of concentrating on whether what is said is true or false in the light of present-day knowledge; or reading his author in a hostile frame of mind that amounts to a failure to respond, on the look-out only to score debating points off him.

I doubt, in short, if any more broadly educational and humanizing activity exists than the study of literature along these lines. Naturally I support Professor Sullivan in his advocacy of what is widely known as Practical Criticism; indeed I have practised practical criticism myself for some years with advanced university students. But in its more strenuous form I regard this as an exercise for advanced students only. There are of course irresponsible critics who allow their pupils to think big about texts of which they have small knowledge, and rather more teachers who are unable to stop their students from writing guff (not at all easy to prevent in the 40-60 % range of ability). But I should condemn this kind of teaching as roundly as any. By contrast the method I have been discussing is almost reactionary in its rigour; it is innovatory chiefly in encouraging co-ordinated pursuit of thought-out, worthwhile objectives. I must insist that what I have been talking about is more than an intensive method of studying highly-charged literary texts. At its widest, it amounts to a way of using texts for the exploration of a whole civilization. Professor Martin Wight in the first number of *Didaskalos* described experiments at the University of Sussex in using literary documents as historical documents. Perhaps I may claim to have outlined the critical procedure which might guide such a method. To some it may appear over-ambitious, involving the professional classicist in a series of amateurisms; they will feel that the traditional methods, though they narrow the scholar's vision, keep his vision clear. This is an illusion: the man who narrows his vision narrows, and corrupts, his understanding.

I think in some ways it may actually be more instructive to study the classics in this way than to study contemporary literature, but that is not my argument here. My purpose has been to describe a method. If it is adopted I see ground for optimism. We shall at any rate be able to feel that a discipline which for long has aroused only anxiety and even revulsion can now inspire affection and legitimate concern:

nuper sollicitum quae mihi taedium,
nunc desiderium curaque non leuis.

We may even hope that the classics, like Horace's ship, will weather the storm.

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